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Cover Photo:
Wool carpet
Central Caucasus, 17th or 18th century
Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1916
TM R36.1.1
195 in (warp) x 93 in (weft)

A classic "dragon" carpet with two-tiered lattice of paired lanceolate leaves enclosing addorsed pairs of dragons and lotus blossoms. Scattered in pairs are stylized lions, ducks, pheasant, and mythical beasts with palmette blossoms and sunbursts placed at points of intersection.

Note to Contributors:

The Textile Museum Journal is devoted to the presentation of scholarship concerning the cultural, technical, historical, and aesthetic significance of textiles. The journal is international in scope with emphasis on geographic areas represented in The Textile Museum's collections: Near East, Central, South, and Southeast Asia, and South and Central America.

Authors are invited to submit manuscripts based on original research of a documentary, analytical, or interpretive nature. Articles should be both scholarly and accessible to the public.

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From Restoration to Conservation: Parallels Between the Traditions of Tapestry Conservation And Carpet Conservation

by R. Bruce Hutchison

For centuries European tapestries and Oriental carpets have been collected and prized for their beauty. They were also recognized as luxury goods and often displayed as symbols of ostentatious wealth. Being easily portable items, tapestries and carpets were included as part of the retinue of wealthy travelers for their ease and comfort. Because they were used, and through this use damaged, it is not surprising that there have been very similar approaches to the care of both tapestries and carpets. Inventories of weaving studios from as early as the 16th century have listed departments for the repair of tapestries. Because of their comparable value to tapestries, carpets were similarly repaired, rewoven, and reconstructed.

Historic Use and Repair of Tapestries

Inventories from the 15th and 16th centuries show that the storerooms of the royal and wealthy families of Europe were filled with

large scale tapestries from various weaving centers, including Paris, Arras, Tournai, Oudenarde, and Brussels. Tapestries were usually commissioned in sets to create rooms within rooms.¹ These sets in turn would tell stories: at first, tales Biblical or mythological in nature, and later, more decorative stories with motifs of the elements or seasons. One tapestry set could be made up of ten pieces, each possibly being 16 feet high and 24–33 feet long. The incomplete inventory of Philip the Bold in 1396 lists 75 tapestries. Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy (1419–67) had a vaulted hall built in his house to store his vast collection of tapestries. Francis I, King of France (1515–47) had more than 200 tapestries.²

Tapestries were taken from one residence to another, sometimes employed to line tents, and even used to line the streets for a victorious parade or a religious festival. The visual sign of rank and wealth conferred by the ownership of these textiles was of paramount importance. In spite of the tremendous wear from display, tapestries were still sufficiently valuable to be used to barter treaties or curry the favors of monarchs.

It is not surprising that menders were employed in great households to care for these vast collections. Wendy Hefford, in her paper, "Bread, Brushes and Brooms," chronicles the care of several different tapestry series in England, and in particular a set of ten tapestries depicting and named for the *History of the Spanish Armada* — a set which is also known as the set of "Eighty-eight."³ First owned by Lord Howard of Effingham, they came into the royal collection in the reign of James I. Ms. Hefford writes:

The English Crown, like most monarchies, had its own staff for the restoration of 'Araas' tapestries. They were under the control of the Master of the Great Wardrobe and were directed by the Yeoman Arras worker. The latter was often chosen from among the leading owners of the tapestry workshops. His own workshop might provide new tapestries for the Crown which figured in the Wardrobe account, but his chief function on the Wardrobe staff was to supervise the cleaning and repair of the tapestries by six or more men at daily rates solely for this purpose.⁴

It seems that the Royal Wardrobe was not only limited to cleaning and repairing the losses in the tapestries, but also added or took away sections for dimensional change when necessary. And in fact, they added new tapestries to a set as needed.

It can be ascertained from the surviving records that tapestries in constant use tended to be cleaned and repaired every twenty or thirty years. The first account of repair by the Wardrobe for the Armada tapestries appears in 1693. "For Crewle and silk to mend the tapestry hangings of Eighty-eight – £7."⁵ This small sum could have hardly supported more than minor repairs for this large set of tapestries. In 1712, there was billing for "Bread and Brooms," a method of cleaning tapestries by brushing bread crumbs across the surface of the piece. Possibly because of the abrasive action of this cleaning, the total bill to mend, clean, and line eighty of the tapestries jumped to £205. Again in 1730, eight of the set were cleaned and repaired. This time there is mention of "Adding and Interweaving Pieces where worn out – £80."⁶ About a year later two pieces were treated. Here is listed "Several pieces of New Tapestry added."⁷

In 1730, it was felt that engravings of the Spanish Armada set should be made "To preserve their likeness in the Prints annexed, which being multiplied and dispersed in various hands, may meet with that Security which the originals must scarcely hope for..."⁸ — not an optimistic sign. They did make it through another round of cleaning and repair in 1760–61, which also restored the colors as well as attached new linings to eight pieces of tapestry. For the first time, the word "stain" is used in the documentation. Unfortunately, the fate of the Armada tapestries was to perish in a fire in the House of Parliament in 1834.

Both in manufacture and repair, the practice of painting or chalking certain details (either faces, flesh, or background scenery) was widespread in the 16th century. A regulation of 1525 forbade the painting of Brussels tapestries of a certain size and fineness. However, an edict of 1544 still allowed the use of ink and chalk for outlining or enhancing areas already woven and for retouching mistakes in weaving. It did condemn excessive painting on newly woven tapestries.⁹

The societal upheavals of the late 17th

and early 18th centuries in Europe seriously affected the production of tapestries; the demand for them had been reduced, and many of the existing ones were stripped of their precious metal threads in order to support war efforts. Tapestry production had reached its nadir.

Toward the end of the 19th century there were several efforts throughout Europe, in England, and in the United States to reintroduce tapestries for interior decoration as part of both the Gothic Revival and the Arts and Crafts Movements.¹⁰ United States tapestry manufacturers were William Baumgarten & Company in the 1890s and Herter Looms in 1908. Both were large design houses that provided everything for the fine home. These companies employed experienced weavers from Europe who had apprenticed at Aubusson, Gobelins, or the Royal Windsor Tapestry workshops. However, both Baumgarten & Company and Herter Looms were initially dependent upon repair work and making reproductions of tapestries in poor condition for their income. This work was generally relegated to the wives of the weavers who were to sew up slits and sew backings on new tapestries.

When the repair work was not entrusted to design firms and decorative arts dealers, it was placed in the hands of reliable ladies in the home, church, or museum to ply their needles in hopes that a "stitch in time" would prevent further decay. As a result, the idea of textile conservation was conceived approximately forty years ago. Stabilization and preservation were the watchwords of this profession. The idea of restoration as opposed to conservation, however, is still an issue with tapestries. Perhaps this is due in part to their pictorial nature as well as their structure. Restoration — or more correctly, reweaving — frequently has been the treatment of choice.

Historic Use and Repair of Carpets

The carpets of Eastern royal manufacturers destined to embellish palaces or given in thanksgiving to a shrine were great luxury items. But rugs in general, pile, or flat construction were utilitarian objects in that part of the world. They were one's seat, dining table, place of worship, or bed.

Traditionally, the Middle Eastern cultures have placed little emphasis on keeping

old possessions. There was a feeling that objects had a life and that once spent were either to be passed down or discarded. Even the exquisite rugs given to shrines, once worn, were given to the poor. When it was felt that they had outlasted their use as rugs, these pieces were used for other purposes, such as shoulder or saddle bags and horse blankets. It is still customary in the eastern parts of the Middle East to thoroughly houseclean on the last Wednesday before the traditional New Year, the first day of Spring, and to rid one's self of old things.¹¹

The first rugs arriving into the European market from the East were seldom used as floor coverings. They more commonly found their use as table and altar covers, as evidenced in many paintings. The idea of floor coverings did not take hold until the late 18th century in Europe and even later in America.

It was not until there was a market for old or "antique rugs" in Europe, and later in the United States during the 19th century, that tribal or village rugs were a viable commodity. As supplies of rugs in perfect condition dwindled, there developed a need for repairers. This suggests that rug and carpet repair for the most part is a phenomenon beginning in the 19th century.

James M. Keshishian lists different levels of treatment for rugs.¹² Under repair is: patching (from other rugs), limited weaving, use of topically applied textile dyes, removal of partial borders to make the object rectangular, mounting the item on a second fabric backing, cannibalizing the rug (reducing its size to provide repair parts), and other innovative and optically corrective procedures.

Unfortunately, repair was no kinder or gentler to tapestries. There are many examples where pieces cut from another tapestry were used for repair. Oftentimes where dark brown yarn is missing, paint has been used to fill in that color. Borders have been cut down to fit the tapestry in a smaller space. Fabric supports have been used, particularly for weak silk areas, and sometimes embroidery stitches have been sewn through the supports. Cutting up a tapestry and using the parts for repair within the same tapestry has also been done.

It is impossible to know if these types of repairs to tapestries predate similar repairs to rugs. Unfortunately, there is little information available on historic repair tech-

niques for carpets. Repairs can rarely be dated by casual visual inspection, although repairs using materials dyed with aniline dyes are post-1860s.

It is interesting to note that the restorers of rugs were drawn from the ranks of carpet makers, as tapestry restorers originally came from the production workshops. Sara Wolf Green has documented different approaches to repair by rug restorers from the different areas of the Middle East.¹³ She feels these differences derive from whether they were trained in a traditional rug weaving area, or came from a family where the craft of rug repair was handed down on its own as a sideline of a rug dealership.

Current Approaches to Rug and Tapestry Use and Conservation

Whether we approve of past restorations or not, in general we should be thankful that for whatever reason, or in whatever manner and method, the restoration and care were provided. These artistic treasures have been preserved for us and for the future.

Today function is still an important factor in determining the course of treatment for these historical textiles. The approaches to care have been modified by textile conservators within the museum context, having the emphasis more properly placed on stabilization. While reconstruction may play a part, this is not the main focus of the treatment. Concerns within the museum which influence treatment decisions are: storage, exhibition space, the size of the piece, and the period of exhibition (permanent vs. temporary display). Within this context, the major problems are providing adequate structural support and minimizing the impact of losses. The physical properties of the tapestry will affect whether a more passive approach or more intervention will be taken in treatment.

In conclusion, I shall end with two lines from the Koran. At first they may seem to conflict, but together they seem to form the idea by which conservators might approach their work. They can both be applied to the maintenance of the spiritual and physical integrity of tapestry and carpet repair: "The potter who patches a cracked vessel and represents it as sound, does evil"; and, "Painting is deception, desecration; it is not repair. To repair is to re-weave."

About the Author

R. Bruce Hutchison is Textile Conservator at the Textile Conservation Laboratory at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine, New York. The facility specializes in the treatment of large-scale textiles.

Notes

1. Karen Finch, "The Conservation of Tapestries," *A Research Report from the Textile Conservation Centre* (London: Textile Conservation Centre, 1980), 3.
2. Genevieve Souchal, *Masterpieces of Tapestry from the Fourteenth to the Sixteenth Century* (Paris: Edition des Musées Nationaux, 1973), 16-17.
3. Wendy Hefford, "Bread, Brushes and Brooms," *Acts of the Tapestry Symposium* (San Francisco: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1979), 65.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. See Alice M. Zrebiec, "The History of the American Tapestry Industry" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1980).
11. Personal communication with Mehrdad Izady, Middle Eastern Studies department, Columbia University, New York, N.Y., 15 January 1990.
12. James M. Keshishian, "Oriental Rugs: Their Value Affected by Conservation, Repair and Restoration," *Cleaning and Restoration* 27, no. 9 (September 1989): 8.
13. Personal communication with Sara Wolf Green, Conservator, The Textile Museum, 12 January 1989.

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